

Admissions Officers Find this Boring...

Amherst: Students playing the college application process too safely . . . it's refreshing to see a kid being him- or herself-you don't have to climb Mount Kenya . . . as long as it's sincere.

Bowdoin: The rehash of the editorial, like nuclear disbandment. Trite conclusions. The travel abroad conclusion: "No matter where we are, we're all the same." The travelogue to Italy: "We went here and here."

Middlebury: We always encourage students to write what they want us to know about them. The least compelling essays are those that seem to be written to impress an admissions office; they tend to lack authenticity.

New College: It's pretty dreary to read an essay on a "hot topic" that does little more than restate the obvious arguments.

Wellesley: I don't want to see a laundry list of extracurricular activities-the information from the third page of the Common Application. It does not help to receive this list. Take one or two activities from this list and explain why they're important. Take that next step. Simply listing activities is not enough.

Williams: Essays that aren't very curious. Essays that rely too heavily on humor, particularly, puns and jokes I've heard before. Funny essays can be quite effective, but only if there's substance below the cleverness.

Yale: Superficiality. There are many students who, for whatever reason, do not go beyond the superficial. They'll tell us what they've been doing [and] keep it fact-based. But they don't get it to a reflective level.

Admissions Officers Hate to See...

Macalester: Misspellings, poor grammar, and typographical errors really get in the way of reading an essay, so attention to detail is important.

Middlebury: Individual admissions officers would respond differently to this, but we all seem to agree that any essay focusing on a boyfriend or girlfriend, no matter how well written, is a very poor choice. The use of profanity, even for "effect" may be viewed as reflecting poor judgment. We don't expect perfection when it comes to grammar, but careless mistakes, especially misspelled words, suggest that students may not be putting much effort into their applications.

Johns Hopkins: There are two things that I see regularly, two "lines" that are crossed. (1) Ideological issues are best left aside. An applicant who gets too much into specific political issues just might be thrusting these views on someone who disagrees, and then [the reader] has to work at remaining objective. We train our staff to take students on their own terms, but we're all human. I don't see why an applicant would test the waters.

(2) Sometimes students come across as immature. Showing a sense of humor is great, but don't use humor in your college application that you wouldn't use with your parents!

Northwestern: Swear words.

USCGA: Essays that are three lines long and poorly written. Almost don't like to see an essay that is too well written—that's written by parents.

Wellesley: Gratitude goes a long way and ingratitude falls flat. We're looking for maturity. Some students think that in order to stand out they need to shock us. We call it the Oprah effect. They shouldn't tell us everything. Overcoming adversity with grace is great, but sometimes telling of a horrific case leaves the committee hanging. Students should sift through their experiences and ask themselves whether the admissions committee needs to hear about this. We're looking for readiness to enter college and intellectual curiosity.

Yale: Forced creativity or forced humor or sort of self-consciously trying to be different. By itself, is that going to keep somebody out? No. But it doesn't help their cause.

If a topic feels forced, they just need to put that pencil down. Students ask themselves, What does that college want to hear? And we keep telling kids that you're 180 degrees in the wrong direction if you're asking yourself that question. They do need to sit in the driver's seat and ask, What should this school know about me?

This is not the time to be particularly shy; on the other hand, you don't want to go at it with a great deal of braggadocio. You don't want to start every paragraph with the letter I. They should be asking themselves, What kind of essay is going to get them as close to what I'm like?

If an essay is particularly bad, but the student's grades are great, what then?

Bates: A student who is a very good student and has taken high-level English courses and has great recommendations as a writer—we have high expectations of that essay; the high numbers with the weak essay: the student has dropped the ball.

The essay itself would never make the decision. An essay can hurt an applicant—if it's rushed, or if it's a copy of something else, if they tried to edit another paper and fit it into the applicant slot, it doesn't work.

Bowdoin: Go back to school or the kid and ask, What should we know?

Claremont McKenna: It might bump the student down. If a student hasn't put time and effort into the essay, we wonder how serious he or she is about us.

Macalester: Then the student may not be admitted.

Middlebury: If an essay is notable for its weakness, then both readers are likely to comment on its shortcomings and factor that into their recommendation to the committee. There are some very bright students who earn great grades but who don't put the care and effort into their applications that we expect. Those applicants don't fare well in our process. Essays can also be an indication of the level of instruction at a particular school. Unfortunately, some students have not been well instructed in terms of grammar and punctuation; we do try to keep a student's educational background in mind.

New College: A badly written essay can certainly tip the scale the wrong way. If a student's application is otherwise strong, we might place the student on our wait list or hold status and ask for another essay. Since this is not done formulaically, it's also possible that we would deny the student outright.

Williams: We turn down many students with great grades and test scores if it seems they are unlikely to contribute to the overall college community. Williams is lucky to have far more qualified applicants than spots in the class.

We make our most difficult decisions among equally academically qualified applicants based on the other criteria in the application. The essay is certainly one of the factors considered, as is the strength and extent of that applicant's extracurricular or community involvement in high school. Scores and grades are most important. The essay won't bring them back. What the essay does is break ties. The most compelling will be admitted.

Yale: There's nothing so stellar about academic credentials that'll convince us to take him without looking at the rest. The transcript is certainly the single most important document. And the recommendations are very important. You know, we admit students who write flat essays and we reject students who write great essays. At a place like Yale, there just aren't that many kids that are so powerful that we have to take them. At many other institutions, you might not have the privilege of turning down a really strong student based on the tone of an essay. Here, we can do it.

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